

Oct. 12
With Humphrey


Dr. Joshua Lederberg
c/o The Washington Post
1515 L Street Nw.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Dr. Lederberg:

I have before me your column of today in which you argue that the rhythm method of contraception may be physiologically ~~un-natural~~ (as indeed it might be, for all I know). My point here is that a paragraph in your piece contains as much non-science in small space as I've seen in some time. Here is the paragraph; my comments are within parentheses:

"The same theoretical suspicions attach to hormonal contraception, the pill, which is, however, demonstrably safer in preventing pregnancies. (Untrue. The pill is not "demonstrably safer" than rhythm in preventing conception; it is ~~demonstrably~~ more effective. One would think that, by now, a scientist would understand the difference between efficacy and safety. Shooting a pregnant woman through the belly is an effective means of contraception, but is is not safe. The FDA says that in some women the pill can cause clotting. Does the rhythm method?) We even lack convincing statistics on the absolute ~~method's~~ safety of mechanical methods, which are usually accompanied by sperm-killing chemicals. (After using the word "safer" about the pill in a scientifically false manner, you here shift to the shocking tactic of casting doubt by implication on the safety of spermicidal creams and jellies and foams. I say this is a shocking tactic because you offer no hard evidence whatsoever that a woman is endangered by these products, which are fundamentally different from the pill in that they are not system^{ic} but topical. Can you be unaware of the difference?) In fact, ordinary water is possibly just as injurious as any other material." (Incredible! Is water a contraceptive? What you mean, I suppose, is that in certain medical conditions, maybe a massive stomach wound, water is dangerous. What's that got to do with contraception? And is water "just as injurious" as, say, sulphuric acid? ~~What's the danger?~~ Why - once again - do you have so very much trouble writing science rather than non-science about contraceptive methods?

Sincerely,


Morton Mintz

News Department
The Washington Post

cc: Howard Simons